

# Off the Record

*by Ivy Marlowe*

MyTropes / RomanceBots

## The File

The photograph in the manila folder was better-looking than Nora Voss had expected.

She'd been doing this job for eight years — six in homicide, two in financial crimes, which was a lateral move everyone else considered a demotion and she considered a promotion into the most sophisticated, least appreciated department in the building. She'd learned to expect a certain profile: mid-fifties, overweight, the kind of man who wore his wealth in inverse proportion to his taste. The kind of face that didn't photograph well because it had stopped trying.

Callum Reyes was thirty-six and photographed like someone had arranged him.

She looked at the surveillance photo — him coming out of a building on Alcott Street, winter coat, morning coffee in one hand, head turned three-quarters toward something off-camera. Dark hair that needed a cut. The strong, considered face of a man who was paying attention to something. Eyes she couldn't quite read at this resolution.

She set it aside and went back to the financial summary.

Reyes Capital Management. Founded eight years ago, currently managing approximately \$340 million in client assets, primarily through the firm's flagship art acquisition fund — a vehicle that purchased contemporary art for institutional and private clients, held assets, generated paper returns, and turned over portfolio holdings at regular intervals. Clean on the surface. Audited annually. Every filing in order.

And underneath it: seventeen wire transfers over eighteen months, moving between Reyes Capital and a network of shell companies registered in Malta, the Cayman Islands, and twice, in an audacity she had to grudgingly respect, the Isle of Man. The receiving entities were owned, directly or through intermediary layers, by a man named Viktor Strand.

Viktor Strand, who ran the most sophisticated money-laundering operation

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on the eastern seaboard and who had not been successfully prosecuted once in eleven years of attempts.

Viktor Strand, who three years ago had been the last person to see a financial analyst named David Park alive before Park ended up in the Harrow River.

David Park's murder was still technically open on the books in homicide. Nobody in that unit worked it anymore.

Nora Voss worked it. She worked everything connected to Viktor Strand because she had been working toward Viktor Strand for two years and Callum Reyes was, according to her captain, the best lead they'd had.

She picked up the photo again.

"Voss." Captain Diane Holt appeared in the doorway. She was fifty-three and had the particular alertness of someone who had learned to be suspicious of everything, including quiet. "You've read the file?"

"Three times."

"And?"

"The money moves are good. Strand's fingerprints are on the receiving end — through the usual layers, but they're there." She paused. "Reyes is either the architect of the transfer scheme or he has no idea what his fund is being used for."

"Which do you think?"

Nora looked at the photograph. "I don't know yet."

Holt came fully into the room and closed the door, which meant the next sentence was the kind that didn't go in the formal file. "I need you close to him," she said. "Not surveillance. Close."

"Undercover."

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"The gallery holds a private client event next Thursday. New acquisition showing, invitation only. We have a name we can put you in under — a collector, Alexandra Vane, based in London, recently relocated. Background is solid. Two days of prep and you're ready." She paused. "I need you to get inside Reyes Capital. Not the outer offices. The inner workings. His trust."

"That takes time."

"Then use it well." Holt picked up the photo and looked at it. "He's smart. Don't underestimate him because he looks like that."

Nora retrieved the photo. "I never underestimate anyone because of how they look."

"No," Holt said. "You underestimate people because you think you've already worked them out. Don't do that either."

It was, Nora would think later, the best advice she received and the advice she failed to take.

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## The Gallery

The Reyes Gallery occupied the ground floor of a converted warehouse on Alcott Street — raw concrete and old brick domesticated by excellent lighting and the kind of restraint that cost more than ostentation would have.

Nora arrived at seven-fifteen as Alexandra Vane: dark blazer, tailored trousers, her brown hair up in the kind of arrangement that suggested she'd done it in three minutes when it had taken twenty-five. The cover was secondhand luxury — money, but not recently. The kind of collector who bought because she wanted to, not because she needed to be seen doing it.

She took a glass of white wine from a passing tray and did not drink it. She looked at the art.

The work on the walls was genuinely good. She hadn't expected that. She'd expected the kind of art that existed to hold value rather than generate it — competent, expensive, unmemorable. Instead: a series of large-scale photographs that were half documentary and half something she didn't have a word for. City textures. The underside of bridges. Industrial surfaces that had been worn into something like beauty.

She was standing in front of the third one when she heard him.

Not his voice first. His presence — the specific quality of attention that some people project, a field you become aware of before you identify its source. She turned.

He was across the room, talking to a woman in red who was clearly enjoying herself, and he was listening with the focus of someone who found other people genuinely interesting rather than professionally useful. He looked up and caught Nora's eye and the look lasted approximately one second longer than accidental.

She looked back at the photograph.

He came to her. Of course he did — she'd calculated that he would, had

positioned herself in front of the most interesting piece in the room and been unmistakably absorbed in it, which was the oldest trick in the social arsenal and still worked because it was true, which was the thing about the oldest tricks.

"Petrova," he said.

She turned, and made sure her expression registered genuine blankness.

"The photographer," he said, gesturing at the series. "Mara Petrova. Lithuanian, based in Berlin now. This is the first time we've shown her work in the States." He paused. "You've been standing in front of this one for four minutes."

"Is that unusual at your events?"

"The average dwell time in this room is about forty seconds." He extended his hand. "Callum Reyes."

She shook it. "Alexandra Vane."

"London?"

"Originally. Less so lately." She looked back at the photograph — a close-up of a wall where paint had been applied and removed so many times it had become geological. "She's documenting erasure," Nora said. "The way surfaces hold the record of what they've been through even when someone's tried to cover it."

He looked at the photograph. "That's the most accurate reading of this work I've heard tonight."

"What's the most inaccurate?"

"One of my clients told me it reminded him of his bathroom tiles."

She laughed before she meant to. It came out real. She filed this as a problem to monitor.

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"Are you in the market?" he asked. Not avaricious — genuinely curious.

"For the right thing." She looked at him directly. "I've found that patience is the most important quality in a collector. You buy quickly and you buy wrong. You buy slowly and you buy true."

He was looking at her with an expression that was difficult to categorize.

"Are you patient, Miss Vane?"

"Extremely," she said, and it was the only sentence she said to him all evening that was entirely true.

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## The Second Meeting

She went back to the gallery five days later, as herself.

Which was not quite accurate — she went back as Alexandra Vane, collector, but without the gallery event as structure. She called ahead and asked if she could spend time with the Petrova series before making a decision. The woman who answered said of course, come at eleven.

The room was empty except for a junior staff member who offered coffee and then left her to it. Nora stood in front of the photographs with her actual notebook — she always kept a personal notebook separate from case files, a habit her first supervisor had called paranoid and she called thorough — and wrote what she actually observed.

She was writing about the fourth photograph when the door at the back of the room opened and Callum Reyes came through it.

He stopped when he saw her. Something moved across his face — not surprise, quite, but the adjustment a person makes when a calculation shifts slightly.

"Miss Vane." He had what appeared to be architectural plans rolled under one arm and a coffee in the other hand. "I didn't know you were coming in today."

"Your staff were kind enough to let me look again. I hope that's alright."

"Of course." He set the plans on a desk against the wall and looked at her notebook. "You take notes."

"I think visually. Writing makes me slow down."

"What does it say?"

She looked at the page. She'd written: *the subject is not the surface — the subject is time made visible*. She closed the notebook.

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"Early thinking," she said. "Still forming."

He looked at her in the way she was beginning to recognize — full attention, no performance. "I have twenty minutes before a call. Can I show you something in the back?"

Every instinct she had said: *yes*. The detective instinct, because back rooms contained evidence. The other instinct — the one she was cataloguing and filing under *problem to monitor* — said yes for a different reason.

She followed him.

The back storage area was not what she'd expected. She'd anticipated the organized vault of a commercial operation — works wrapped in transit, labeled and catalogued. Instead: a working space. A long table with art books and auction catalogs. A wall of index cards with small reproductions pinned to them, organized by some system she couldn't immediately decode. A drawing board. The organized complexity of a person who thought carefully and kept the evidence of their thinking.

He walked her to the index card wall.

"The fund acquisition process," he said. "We maintain a watchlist — works we're tracking, provenance research, market position. Everything visible. Everything documented." He said it without particular emphasis, but she heard the subtext: *nothing hidden*.

She studied the wall. Three hundred cards, maybe more. Each one a work of art, each with notes in a small, precise hand.

"You do this yourself?" she asked.

"Most of it. I have a research associate for the auction tracking, but the evaluation is mine." He paused. "I started as a buyer, before the fund. Private clients, specific briefs. You learn to pay attention."

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"To what a piece costs to look at," he said. "Not what it costs to own. What it costs you personally — the attention, the discomfort, the thing that keeps you looking even when you'd rather not." He glanced at her. "It's the only reliable metric I've found."

She thought of the Petrova photograph. The surfaces that held the record of what they'd been through.

"What happens to a piece that costs too much?" she asked.

He considered this. "You buy it anyway," he said. "Because the cost is the point."

She wrote that down when she got back to the car, in the notebook that was only hers, before she turned it over in her mind and understood that she wasn't only writing it as evidence.

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## What the Wire Records Show

The wire transfer records told a story, but stories need readers.

Nora spent three days at her actual desk — the one in the financial crimes unit, not the cover identity — going through every transaction between Reyes Capital and the shell network. She had the originals and she had the forensic accounting summary from the analyst on loan from the FBI, who was thorough and correct and entirely missing something.

The missing thing: timing.

The transfers were regular — monthly, consistent amounts, which suggested a standing arrangement rather than ad hoc payments. But the amounts varied, and the variation tracked, with a lag of approximately six weeks, with the high-value acquisition events at Reyes Capital. When the fund bought big, the wire transfers two months later were large. When the market was quiet, the transfers were smaller.

This was consistent with the prosecution theory: Reyes Capital was washing Strand's money through art acquisitions, inflating valuations, running the cleaned cash back through the fund's legitimate returns.

It was also consistent with something else. She wrote it in the personal notebook and didn't put it in the case file yet, because she didn't know what it meant: *the transfer amounts track fund performance. not inflation scheme. looks like profit share. Reyes may not be laundering for Strand. Reyes may be giving Strand his cut.*

His cut of what?

She went back to the gallery.

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## Thursday Evening

He was there when she arrived, which surprised her because she'd come without calling.

He was in the main gallery space with a woman she didn't recognize — mid-forties, expensive shoes, the body language of someone who came to the gallery frequently and felt entitled to access. They were in conversation in front of a new piece that had gone up since Nora's last visit: a large oil painting, dark and complicated, a room in shadow with a single window throwing knife-edge light across the floor.

Nora looked at the painting from the doorway and didn't move.

It was, she thought, the kind of painting that made you feel like someone had observed you privately. The room in the painting could have been any room. The light was the particular light of a specific hour — four PM in winter, or seven AM in summer. The kind of light that meant transition.

Callum caught her eye over his client's shoulder. Something changed very slightly in his expression — a small, involuntary shift — and she filed it and looked back at the painting.

The client left twenty minutes later. Callum crossed the gallery.

"You keep coming back," he said.

"The Petrova series." She nodded toward it. "Still deciding."

"You've been deciding for three weeks."

"I told you I was patient."

He stopped beside her. They were both looking at the new painting now, the dark room with the sharp light. "What do you see in this one?" he asked.

She didn't answer immediately. She looked at the light on the painted floor

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— the precision of it, the geometry. "A moment just before something changes," she said. "The light's about to move. The room's still empty, but not for much longer."

She felt him turn to look at her.

"Yes," he said, quietly. "That's exactly it."

The silence between them was a specific type. She'd sat in enough interview rooms to know the silences that were waiting to be filled from the ones that were complete in themselves. This was the latter.

"Come have dinner," he said. "There's a place around the corner. The food is unremarkable but the room is good and I haven't eaten since this morning."

The detective in her said: *yes, this is the access you need.*

The other part of her — the part she kept filing and not examining — said: *yes.*

"Alright," she said.

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## The Table

The restaurant was a small Italian place with dim lighting and paper tablecloths and a menu that had four items and didn't need more. He clearly came regularly — the woman who seated them said his name as a greeting rather than a question.

They talked for three hours.

She was supposed to be gathering intelligence. She was gathering something, but its category kept shifting. He talked about the gallery — not the fund, not the financial architecture that interested her professionally, but the work itself. A provenance dispute he'd been untangling for two years involving a mid-century work that had changed hands six times under three different owners, all of whom had partial and conflicting documentation. The particular satisfaction of following a paper trail to its origin.

"You sound like a detective," she said, and then kept her face neutral.

He smiled. "I suppose that's what provenance work is. Tracking what actually happened versus what the record says happened." He broke a piece of bread. "They're not always the same."

"What do you do when they're not?"

"Depends on what you find. If the record is wrong by accident — misattribution, honest confusion — you correct it. If the record is wrong by design—" He paused. "Then you have to decide what to do with what you know."

She looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Sometimes people build careful structures to make something look like what it isn't." He was looking at the table, turning his wine glass. "The record says one thing. The reality says another. And the person who discovered the discrepancy has to decide: do I go to the record, or do I go to the people who created it?"

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"Those aren't mutually exclusive."

"They can be," he said. "If the people who created the false record are more powerful than the people who can correct it." He looked up. His eyes were grey in this light. The kind of grey that shifted. "Sometimes the only way to correct a record is to wait until you have enough evidence that no one can argue with it."

She was very still.

"Is that what you're doing?" she asked. "Waiting?"

He held her gaze for a beat. "I'm always working on several things at once," he said, and smiled in a way that closed the door gently, and changed the subject to the provenance dispute, and she let him change it.

She sat with the closed door for the rest of the meal and did not reach back for what was behind it.

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## The Contact

"How's it going?" Holt asked, without looking up from her desk.

"She's in. Dinners. Gallery access. He seems to trust the cover." Nora sat down. "I need more time before I push toward the financial side."

"How much time?"

"Another two weeks. Maybe three."

Holt set her pen down. "This case has a window, Voss. The DA's office is watching. They want movement."

"They want an arrest that sticks. Movement without substance is just noise." She held her captain's gaze. "Two more weeks."

"Three," Holt said. "After that I'm pulling you."

Nora nodded and stood.

"Something else?" Holt said.

"The transfer timing anomaly I flagged last month," Nora said. "Has anyone looked at it?"

"Chen looked at it. Says it's consistent with the laundering theory."

"It's also consistent with profit-sharing."

A pause. "Profit-sharing with Strand."

"Or profit-sharing from Strand." She watched Holt's expression. "The money's moving in the direction we'd expect if Strand was paying Reyes, not if Reyes was cleaning Strand's money."

"Why would Strand pay Reyes?"

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"That's what I'm trying to find out." She picked up her bag. "Three weeks."

She drove back to the cover apartment the department maintained — a one-bedroom on the north side, clean and sparse — and sat at the kitchen table and opened her personal notebook and tried to write about the investigation with the clarity she usually brought to it.

She wrote: *dinner ran three hours. He talks about evidence the way I do. He thinks in patterns. Either he's extremely good at misdirection or he's extremely good at something else.*

She stopped.

She wrote: *problem.*

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## **Close**

The second dinner happened four days later. He asked, and she said yes with the speed of someone who had talked herself into it on professional grounds and then felt the specific embarrassment of her own transparency.

The third dinner happened the following week, at his suggestion, at his apartment.

She should have declined. The professional architecture of the operation required her to control the environment. His home was his ground.

She didn't decline.

His apartment was on the top floor of a building two blocks from the gallery — large, thoughtful, with the same quality of light she'd noticed in the gallery. He cooked, efficiently and without ceremony, while she sat at the kitchen island and asked about the fund and he answered in the careful, general way of a person who understood that finances are private and the conversation wasn't yet there.

After dinner they stood on the terrace with wine in the dark and she looked at the city and was acutely, inconveniently aware of him next to her.

"What brought you to collecting?" he asked.

She had the cover answer. She gave it — inheritance, an aunt with taste, exposure to good work early. All documented in the Alexandra Vane file.

"What actually brought you to it?" he said.

She looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"You said collecting was about patience. Most collectors I've met are not patient people. They're acquisitive people who mistake the speed of their desire for the quality of their taste." He paused. "You're different. The way you look at things." He held her gaze. "You're not seeing art. You're reading evidence."

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It was the most dangerous sentence anyone had said to her in two years of undercover work.

She kept her breathing even. "I look carefully at things," she said. "That's not unusual for someone who cares about what they're buying."

"No," he said. He was still looking at her. "But it's the particular quality of it. Like you're looking for something specific. Not deciding whether you want the piece — you already know. You're looking for what it will tell you."

"You could say that about any serious collector."

"I could," he said. "I'm not."

She looked at the city. The lights below, the particular orange of it, the way a city looks from above — laid out, legible, like a map of something that also needs to be walked to be understood.

"I'm careful," she said. "It's a character flaw."

"No," he said, quietly. "It's the thing I find most—" He stopped. He looked at his wine. He seemed, briefly, like a man catching himself. "It's a quality I respect."

The moment was specific and weighted and she filed it in the notebook she kept only for herself.

She did not, that night, tell him who she was.

She also did not close the distance between them, though she was aware, on the train back to the cover apartment, that she had wanted to, and that the wanting was no longer something she could file as a professional inconvenience.

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## The Artist

The Petrova series was three paintings deep into her personal notebook by now — she'd been writing about them without intending to. The erasure quality. The record of what had been removed.

On the Tuesday of her fourth week undercover, she was in the gallery alone — he was on a call — and she stood in front of the fourth photograph in the series. The largest. A whole wall of a building, painted and repainted until the colors had bled into each other in layers, the history of every version showing through the last.

He came out of the back when the call ended and found her there.

"Have you decided?" he asked.

She turned. "Which piece?"

"Any of them."

She looked at the series. "The fourth one," she said. "This one."

He looked at it with her. "Why this one?"

"Because it's the most complicated," she said. "The others are about erasure. This one is about accumulation. Everything's still here. It's just become something else."

He didn't say anything. She felt him look at her.

"What would you do with it?" he said. "If you owned it."

"Live with it," she said. "Change my mind about it regularly. Come back to it." She paused. "The paintings that cost the most to look at — you can't figure them out and then put them away. They keep asking."

She turned to find him looking at her with an expression she had no cover response to. Unguarded and precise and directed entirely at her.

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"What?" she said.

"Nothing," he said. And then: "That's the most honest thing you've said to me."

The silence after it was the kind that changes the shape of a room.

He kissed her.

Or she did — she was never quite sure afterward, because the movement was mutual, both of them arriving at the same point from opposite directions, and it was brief and careful and she pulled back first and looked at him.

He looked back.

"I should—" she started.

"Yes," he said, stepping back. Giving her the room.

She picked up her jacket.

"Nora," he said.

She went very still.

She turned. He was standing with his hands at his sides, looking at her with an expression she had never seen from him before — not the careful, considered attention of a man who was managing his distance, but the open, stripped face of someone who had run out of distance to manage.

"That's not your name," he said. "Is it."

It was not a question.

The gallery was very quiet. The Petrova photographs looked on.

"No," she said.

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He nodded once, slowly, and sat down on the low bench in the center of the room and looked at the fourth photograph, and she stood where she was, and neither of them said anything for a very long time.

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## The Truth

She should have walked out. Called it in. Gone back to the department and told Holt the cover was blown and they'd need a different approach.

She sat down next to him on the bench.

"How long have you known?" she asked.

"Two weeks," he said. "Maybe three."

"Since—"

"Since the second dinner. The way you described following the provenance trail." He paused. "You used the phrase 'paper trail to its origin.' It's a specific phrase. It's not what collectors say."

"What do collectors say?"

"Documentation.' 'Attribution history.'" He was still looking at the photograph. "Paper trail is what investigators say." He glanced at her. "You're financial crimes. Not homicide. The fund."

She didn't confirm or deny. She was, she realized, no longer sure which professional obligation currently applied.

"Viktor Strand," she said.

He was quiet for a moment. "Yes."

"Are you going to tell me you're innocent?"

He turned and looked at her directly. "I'm going to tell you it's more complicated than whatever file you've been reading." He held her gaze. "And I'm going to tell you that I've been building a case against Viktor Strand for two years. Not for your department. For myself. For David Park."

The name hit her like cold water. "You knew David Park."

"He was my analyst," Callum said. "He found the discrepancy. He came to me with it. I told him I needed time — I was trying to figure out how deep it went, whether we could go to the authorities safely without Strand knowing in advance." He stopped. "I was two weeks away from going to the FBI when Park died."

"And you didn't come forward."

"I tried." Something hardened in his face. "I contacted the FBI field office. Anonymously, because I wasn't certain who in your world Strand had access to. I was told the case had insufficient evidence for an interview. A week later, the FBI agent I'd contacted was transferred to another field office." He paused. "I learned two things from that. One: Strand has reach. Two: I couldn't trust the official channel."

Nora looked at her hands. She thought about the transfer timing. The profit-sharing pattern she'd flagged and Holt had dismissed.

"The wire transfers," she said.

"Are his payments to me," he said. "For the access. I've been a cooperative partner in his money management — on the surface. Underneath, I've been documenting every transaction, every contact, every instruction from his organization. Two years of records." He paused. "I was building toward something he couldn't argue with in court. Something too complete to be buried."

She looked at him. "And now?"

"Now," he said carefully, "a financial crimes detective with a cover identity has been sitting across my dinner table for four weeks, and I've been—" He stopped. "I've been deciding what to do with that."

"And?"

"And I think you're the first person in two years who might actually be able to use what I have," he said. "If you're real. If what I think I saw in you over four dinners and three visits to this gallery is real."

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"What do you think you saw?"

"Someone who cares what actually happened," he said. "Not just what the charge sheet says." He met her eyes. "Someone who followed the transfer timing anomaly and came to a different conclusion than the rest of your team."

She stared at him. "How do you know about the anomaly?"

"Because I designed it to be findable by the right person," he said. "It took you eleven days. That was faster than I expected."

The gallery was very quiet. Somewhere outside, the city made its ordinary sounds.

"I need to see the documentation," she said. Her voice was professional — the voice she used in interview rooms. "All of it."

"I know," he said. "I'll show you everything."

She looked at the Petrova photograph. The accumulated layers. Everything still there, just become something else.

"Callum," she said.

"Yes."

"I still don't know what to do with you."

He looked at her. "No," he said. "Neither do I." A pause. "We seem to be in the same position."

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## The Documentation

The documentation was kept in a cloud storage system protected by an encryption protocol she'd need their technical analyst to crack — except that Callum gave her the decryption key with a directness that suggested he'd been waiting to give it to someone specific.

She spent a day reading it.

On paper, from the outside: a meticulous record of financial crimes. Wire transfers, shell company movements, the full architecture of Strand's money management system laid out with the precision of someone who understood both the mechanics and the law well enough to document violations at the level of specificity that prosecutors needed.

But underneath the financial record: something more. Communication logs between Callum and Strand's intermediaries — men who used the phone numbers and email patterns of legitimate business but whose instructions were unmistakably not. And tucked into the file system, in a folder labeled with a date — the date David Park died — a separate document.

The document was a record of a conversation. A meeting between Callum and one of Strand's senior associates, three days before Park's death. In the meeting, the associate had asked — in the careful, deniable language of organized crime — whether Park had been adequately "managed." Callum had said yes. The associate had said that was good. That loose threads caused problems.

Callum had recorded the conversation. He'd had the device in his jacket. The recording file was there, attached to the document.

She listened to it three times.

Then she called the department.

Then she stopped.

She set her phone down and sat at the table in the cover apartment and

thought about what happened to the FBI agent who'd been transferred after receiving Callum's anonymous tip. She thought about the DA's office watching this case. She thought about what Holt would do with this information.

She thought about Callum Reyes, sitting alone in a gallery for two years with enough evidence to destroy Viktor Strand and no one he trusted to give it to.

She picked up her personal notebook and wrote: *if I call this in through the normal channel and Strand has reach into that channel, the documentation disappears and Callum Reyes goes to prison for Park's murder. if I don't call it in, I am aiding a material witness. if I call it in directly to the DA without going through Holt, I am violating chain of command and probably ending my career.*

She wrote: *and if I'm wrong about him, I'm doing all three of the above for nothing.*

She wrote: *I am not wrong about him.*

She looked at that sentence for a long time.

Then she picked up her phone and called not Holt, but an Assistant US Attorney named Priya Sandoval, who had been working organized crime cases for twelve years and who had never, in Nora's knowledge, been successfully pressure-applied by anyone.

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## The Complication

She told Callum what she'd done.

They were in the gallery — it was after hours, the staff gone, the Petrova photographs watching — and she told him about Sandoval, about why she'd bypassed her chain of command, and about what would need to happen next.

He listened without interrupting.

"You went around your captain," he said.

"Yes."

"That's going to cost you."

"Yes."

He looked at her. "Why?"

She held his gaze. "Because I believe the documentation. And I don't fully trust the channel." She paused. "And because I've been trying to get Strand for two years for a murder that everyone else stopped caring about."

"David Park."

"His case has been open on the books in homicide for three years. Nobody works it. I started two years ago because—" She stopped.

"Because?"

"Because I was in financial crimes already and I found the money trail and I followed it and I found Strand and I found you and I thought—" She stopped again.

"You thought I was the direct route to Strand," he said. Not accusatory.

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"Yes."

"And now?"

She looked at the dark painting — the room with the knife-edge light. The moment before something changed.

"Now I think you're the route to Strand in a different way than I thought," she said. "And I think if we do this right—" She paused. "If *you* cooperate formally with Sandoval's office, with protection, with the record you've been building—"

"He goes down properly," Callum said.

"Yes."

He was quiet for a moment. "And me?"

"Sandoval won't promise anything I haven't heard from her personally. But the documentation speaks for itself. You've been operating as a de facto informant for two years without authorization, which is legally complicated, but the alternative reading — that you were an unwilling participant in Strand's operation who was attempting to build a case — is well-supported." She held his gaze. "I'm not going to promise you an outcome."

"No," he said. "I know." He looked at his hands. "I've been sitting with this for two years. The possibility that it doesn't end well. That even with everything I have—" He stopped. "David Park was twenty-eight years old. He came to me because he trusted me and I told him I needed two more weeks and then he was gone."

She watched him.

"I've been carrying that for three years," he said. "The weeks I waited." He looked up. "Whatever it costs me to finish this, it's less than what it cost him."

She moved from where she was standing to where he was sitting. She sat beside him, as she had the night the gallery had been empty and the truth

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## Off the Record

by Ivy Marlowe

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had arrived. She didn't touch him. Just sat.

"I know," she said.

He turned and looked at her.

"Nora," he said. First time he'd used her name since the gallery. "What's your actual name?"

"Nora Voss," she said. "Detective, financial crimes. Eight years on the force. Two years on Strand."

"Nora Voss," he said. Like he was finding the shape of it.

"Yes."

He reached over and took her hand. Just held it. Nothing else. The gesture of two people who were inside something complicated together and were not pretending otherwise.

She let him.

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## **What She Couldn't File**

She couldn't file what happened next because there was no professional category for it.

What happened was: she went back to the gallery at nine PM when she should have gone back to the cover apartment, and the lights were still on, and Callum was there.

What happened was: they talked for an hour about things that had nothing to do with Strand or the case or the documentation — about the city, about why she'd joined the force, about his first acquisition, an absolutely terrible landscape painting he'd bought at twenty-two because it had looked expensive and turned out to be wrong in every possible way and he'd kept it anyway. About what it was like to look at a piece of work that cost something, really cost something — not in money, but in the self, the long attention you had to give it.

What happened was: at some point the conversation stopped being a conversation and became a different kind of exchange — the kind that happens in the space between two people who have been in something together and have run out of reasons to pretend they aren't.

He kissed her again, and this time she didn't pull back.

It was slow. Deliberate. The kind of kiss that wants to know the answer to a question before it proceeds. His hands were in her hair and she had one hand against his chest and the other at the nape of his neck, and she was aware of his heartbeat under her palm — faster than his controlled exterior would suggest.

She pulled back, not away. Looked at him.

"This is—" she started.

"I know what this is," he said.

"You know what it complicates."

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"Yes." His forehead against hers. "I know." A pause. "Do you want to stop?"

She looked at him in the low light of the gallery, the photographs watching, the dark painting with its knife-edge light. She thought about the personal notebook with its accumulation of entries. The weight of two years toward this case. The weight of what she'd begun to feel — the specific, inconvenient gravity of a person she'd been told to treat as a target and couldn't.

"No," she said.

What happened after that she kept in the notebook that was only hers.

She would write: *I have made a significant professional error. I am aware of this. I cannot account for it except to say that the alternative — treating it as a mistake and reversing it — would have required a level of dishonesty toward him that I found I was incapable of.*

She would write: *He is not what the file says he is. The file is incomplete.*

She would write: *I am also not what the file says I am. We have that in common.*

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## Holt

She told Holt the cover was blown on a Monday morning.

She did not tell her everything. She told her: Reyes had identified her as law enforcement. She had maintained the access and continued gathering intelligence. She had made contact with Sandoval's office regarding the documentation Reyes was willing to provide.

She watched Holt's face during the Sandoval part.

"You contacted the AUSA directly," Holt said.

"Yes."

"Without clearing it with me."

"I had concerns about the integrity of the standard channel," Nora said.

"Based on the FBI transfer incident two years ago that's in the background file."

"That incident was reviewed. It was a routine reassignment."

"I know that's what the review found." She kept her voice neutral.

Holt looked at her for a long time. "Tell me you haven't slept with him."

The silence that followed was approximately two seconds too long.

"Nora." Holt's voice had dropped.

"The case is solid," Nora said. "The documentation he's providing is comprehensive. Sandoval has reviewed the preliminary materials and considers them significant. Whether or not my conduct in the course of the operation was—"

"Whether or not—" Holt pressed her hand flat on the desk. "Nora. You understand that anything he's given you is now tainted. That any competent

defense attorney—"

"Sandoval's office is building the approach around the documentation as independently verified," Nora said. "My personal conduct is being—managed carefully. I've disclosed the relationship to Sandoval. She's assessed the risk. She considers the documentation sufficiently independent of my involvement to proceed."

"You disclosed to the AUSA before you disclosed to me."

Silence.

Holt stood. She walked to the window. The squad room was visible through the glass — the ordinary machinery of the unit, people at desks, phones, the coffee machine making its regular complaint.

"How long?" Holt said, without turning.

"The relationship? Two weeks."

"The knowledge that the cover was blown?"

"Five days."

"Before or after the relationship?"

Nora said nothing.

"Christ." Holt turned. "Go home. I'm putting you on administrative leave pending a review of your conduct during the operation."

"If you put me on leave and it gets back to Strand's network—"

"I know," Holt said, flatly. "Which is why I said *go home* and not *hand in your badge*. I'm reviewing your conduct. You're still attached to the investigation. But you're not in the field. Not with Reyes."

"Sandoval wants—"

## Off the Record

by Ivy Marlowe

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"Tell Sandoval she has everything you've gathered. Tell her my office is cooperating. And tell her that the next time a detective in my unit decides to take their case to a federal prosecutor without first discussing it with me, I will make sure that detective's next assignment is counting parking violations." She held Nora's gaze. "Do you understand?"

"Yes," Nora said.

"Is it worth it?" Holt asked. And something shifted — from captain to something older and more tired and more human. "Tell me honestly. Is what you've got worth what this is going to cost?"

Nora looked at her. "The documentation is going to put Viktor Strand in a federal prison for the rest of his life," she said. "And close David Park's murder case." She paused. "Yes. It's worth it."

Holt nodded, once. "Go home."

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## **Administrative Leave**

The cover apartment felt different without the cover.

She was still in it — the department paid through the month — but the Alexandra Vane file was in a box, the gallery visits were suspended, and the only reason she had to leave was groceries and the weekly call with Sandoval's office that was now her primary professional link.

On the third day of leave, her phone rang. Unknown number.

She answered.

"Miss Voss." The voice was male, older, with the particular flatness of someone who spent a great deal of time in rooms where other people were nervous. "This is a courtesy call."

She was already at the door, signaling to the department-issued security detail she'd been given — one man, plainclothes, parked outside. He was on his phone. She caught his eye through the window and he nodded.

"Courtesy from whom?" she said.

"From people who understand that the situation with Mr. Reyes has the potential to become unnecessarily complicated." A pause. "Mr. Reyes is a business associate of ours. We'd prefer that any documentation he may have gathered were to become unavailable before it becomes relevant."

"I'm sure you would."

"The people I represent are able to make certain complications in your professional record—" a pause, "—disappear. In exchange for a straightforward act of evidence management."

"Evidence management," she said.

"Disposal," he said. "Of whatever has been provided to your office and to the AUSA."

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"And if I decline?"

"We would be disappointed." The flatness didn't change. "Mr. Reyes would likely find his legal situation significantly more complicated. And you would find that the complications in your professional record became rather more prominent."

The call ended.

She looked at her phone for a moment. Then she called Sandoval.

Then she called Callum.

He answered on the first ring.

"They called me," she said.

A silence. Then: "When?"

"Four minutes ago."

"The same number?"

"Unknown. Yes."

A longer silence. "They've done this before. When I was close to going to the FBI the first time, I got a similar call. It's the first step of their playbook — gauge the response before they escalate."

"What's the escalation?"

"That depends," he said, "on whether they think the approach worked."

"It didn't work."

"I know." She heard something in his voice — the specific quality of relief that has been waiting too long. "I know it didn't." A pause. "Nora. Are you safe?"

## Off the Record

by Ivy Marlowe

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"Security detail outside," she said. "Sandoval's office is pulling the phone records on the number. I'm fine."

"I need you to know—" He stopped. "If the legal situation becomes difficult for you. If what they said about your record—"

"It won't change anything," she said. "I made my choices clearly."

"Nora."

"I'm serious. Whatever this costs professionally—" She stopped. "I've been looking for Strand for two years. I'm not going to—" She stopped again.

"What?" he said, quietly.

"I'm not going to stop," she said. "For the job or for you or for any other reason."

She heard him breathe.

"Okay," he said. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," she said. "We're not done."

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## What Strand Knew

The threat call was followed, as Callum had predicted, by escalation.

It came not to Nora but to her captain — an anonymous tip to the department's internal affairs division suggesting that Detective Voss had developed a personal relationship with a subject of investigation, had bypassed chain of command in handling evidence, and had potentially compromised the integrity of an ongoing operation.

All of which was true.

The IA review began the same day. Nora was informed by a detective she'd worked with for three years who had the uncomfortable expression of someone delivering news they didn't want to deliver.

She sat with it for an afternoon.

Then she went to see Callum.

Not the gallery. The apartment building, unannounced, late enough that the security detail thought she was staying the night and didn't comment, which told her they'd been briefed about the relationship, which meant Sandoval's office was managing the disclosure carefully.

He opened the door and looked at her.

"IA," she said.

"I heard." He stepped back. Let her in.

The apartment at night was different from the gallery — warmer, less curated, evidence of an actual human life in the books left open on surfaces and the coffee cup she'd noticed three visits ago was now rinsed and upside-down on the drying rack. She catalogued all of it without meaning to.

She sat at the kitchen counter. He didn't ask if she wanted anything — he

put the kettle on.

"They're using the truth," she said. "As a weapon. Everything in the IA complaint is accurate. The relationship. The chain of command issue. The Sandoval contact." She watched him turn. "They know that defending myself requires me to tell a story that still looks bad even when it's explained."

"Yes," he said. "That's the approach." He brought two mugs and sat across from her. "I'm sorry."

"Don't." She looked at him directly. "Don't apologize for the situation. You didn't create it."

"I created part of it."

"The part I chose to be in," she said. "That's mine."

He held her gaze. There was something in his face that she was used to seeing now — the stripped, present quality that lived under the control. "What happens to your career if the IA review goes badly?"

"I lose the financial crimes posting. Possibly lose the detective grade." She wrapped her hands around the mug. "I'd survive it. I've built a case for two years. If the case closes Strand and closes Park's murder, the rest of it is—manageable." She paused. "Less manageable if the case falls apart."

"It won't fall apart," he said. "The documentation is complete. Sandoval's team has been through it. She says the recording from the Park meeting is the centerpiece."

"It is." She looked at him. "When you made that recording—"

"I knew it was the most important thing I would ever do," he said. "I knew that if anything happened to me, that file needed to exist somewhere that wasn't my control." He paused. "That's part of why I built the anomaly into the transfer timing. Not just to be found — but to be found by the right person. Someone who was actually following the money."

## Off the Record

by Ivy Marlowe

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"You were engineering your own exposure."

"Engineered it to be found by someone smart enough to see it wasn't what it looked like." He held her gaze across the kitchen counter. "I wasn't wrong about you."

She looked at him. The detective part of her — the part that categorized and documented — noted: *thirty-six, dark hair that still needed a cut, grey eyes that shifted with the light, the face of a person who had been carrying something alone for too long and had recently been relieved of it.* The other part noted: *everything else.*

"I wasn't wrong about you either," she said.

He leaned across the counter and kissed her with the quietness of something that had already been decided, and she let the mug go and kissed him back.

The documentation could survive the night.

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## The Night

This is the part she didn't put in any file, personal or professional.

He was careful with her in the way of a person who understood that this mattered — not urgent, not acquisitive, but present, in the way he was present with a painting he'd decided to live with. Full attention. No part of him somewhere else.

She was not careful in the same way. She had been careful for eight years — the professional carefulness of a woman in a field that required it, the personal carefulness of someone who had learned to hold everything at a slight remove because the remove was protective. She had, in the gallery and at the dinner table and in the cover apartment during the sleepless nights, been carefully filing and assessing and monitoring.

She stopped being careful.

Not recklessly — not the absence of thought, but the absence of the remove. She was entirely there, which was its own kind of disorientation, like walking into a room with no walls.

Later, in the low light of his bedroom, she lay next to him and felt the unfamiliar quality of it — not the physical aftermath, which she knew the shape of, but the specific vulnerability of having been fully present with another person and not having managed it away.

"You're thinking," he said.

"Occupational habit."

"About what?"

She looked at the ceiling. "About the fact that I've been careful for a long time," she said. "About everything. The job, specifically. Keeping everything in the right category." She paused. "You don't fit in any of the categories."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

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"It's an observation." She turned her head to look at him. "I don't know what to do with you."

"You said that before."

"It was true then."

"And now?"

She looked at him. "Now I know what I want to do with you," she said. "I just don't know what happens next."

"Next is Sandoval's office," he said. "Then the prosecution. Then whatever the IA review decides." He held her gaze. "And then—" He stopped.

"Tell me," she said.

"And then, if we're both still standing," he said, carefully, "I'd like to take you somewhere without any of this attached." He paused. "Just—yourself. Not the detective. Not the case."

She looked at him for a long time.

"That might take a while," she said.

"I'm patient," he said. And the way he said it — using her word, from the first night — made something shift in her chest that she didn't immediately file.

"Yes," she said. "Alright."

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## **Sandoval**

The meeting with Priya Sandoval took place in a conference room in the federal building that had the antiseptic quality of all federal conference rooms and no art on the walls, which Nora noted and decided was appropriate.

Sandoval was forty-four, compact, and had the particular energy of someone who had been angry about something for a long time and had found an excellent use for it. She came in with two associates and a stack of files and looked at Callum Reyes with the expression of a woman who had made a professional calculation and was prepared to be wrong if necessary.

"Mr. Reyes," she said. "We've reviewed the documentation. All of it. Including the Park recording." She sat. "I have four questions before we go further."

Callum nodded.

"The recording of the Park conversation. You made it yourself, with a personal device, without authorization from any law enforcement body. Walk me through the day."

He walked her through it. The meeting request from Strand's associate. The decision to record. The device, its storage, the encryption he'd applied that same night. The file transfer to the cloud system within six hours.

"Why six hours?" Sandoval asked.

"Because if anything happened to me before I transferred it, the recording was gone," he said. "Six hours was the window I calculated I had before anyone checked up on whether the meeting had produced what they wanted."

Sandoval made a note. "You were afraid."

"Yes."

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"Good," she said, without warmth. "People who aren't afraid make bad decisions. What did Strand's associate say, explicitly, when he asked whether Park had been managed?"

"He used the phrase 'the Park situation has been addressed.' He asked if there were any loose threads on my side. I said no. He said that was good — that Mr. Strand appreciated a clean house."

"And Park was already dead at this point?"

"No. He died two days later." Callum's voice was even. The quality of evenness that cost something. "I understood what 'addressed' meant. I didn't fully understand it was already scheduled."

Sandoval looked at him steadily. Then she looked at Nora. Then she looked at her files.

"The transfer timing anomaly," she said to Nora. "Detective Voss. Walk me through your analysis."

Nora did. The full version — the lag, the correlation with fund performance, the profit-share interpretation, the way it diverged from the laundering theory. Sandoval's associates took notes.

When she finished, Sandoval was quiet for a moment.

"The laundering theory is what your department's prosecution is built on," Sandoval said.

"Yes."

"If the profit-share interpretation is correct, the prosecution theory is wrong. Reyes wasn't washing Strand's money. He was being paid by Strand for fund access and — we now know — for providing Strand with a legitimate financial front." She paused. "Which is still multiple counts of conspiracy. But it puts Reyes in a different legal position."

"Yes," Nora said.

"And you reached this conclusion—" Sandoval looked at her, "—while operating undercover."

"Before the personal relationship," Nora said. "The anomaly analysis predates the first dinner."

"I know," Sandoval said. "I verified it against your case notes timestamps." She held Nora's gaze. "I'm noting this for the record because it matters. Your analysis was independent and prior. The relationship is a complication — it will be raised by Strand's defense — but the core evidentiary chain is clean."

Nora breathed.

"Mr. Reyes," Sandoval said. "I'm prepared to offer you formal cooperation status with the US Attorney's office, with associated protections, in exchange for your complete testimony regarding Viktor Strand's operations and your full provision of the documentation you've gathered." She paused. "In exchange, my office will seek a deferred prosecution agreement on the conspiracy counts. Subject to review. Subject to your continued cooperation." She looked at him. "The Park matter will be referred to homicide and prosecuted against Strand as a murder-for-hire. You will be a material witness, not a defendant."

The room was quiet.

"I want it on the record," Callum said, "that I attempted to provide information to the FBI field office two years ago. That the agent I contacted was subsequently transferred. And that I continued operating as a documentation source in the absence of a legitimate official channel."

"It will be on the record," Sandoval said.

"Then yes," he said. "I agree."

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## The Cost

The IA review cleared her on the conduct charge, with conditions.

The finding: Detective Voss had operated in an undercover capacity in a manner that deviated from standard protocol regarding the management of personal relationships with subjects of investigation. The deviation was not determined to constitute gross misconduct, given the documented evidence that the relationship developed subsequent to the operative professional contact and given the concurrent disclosure to a supervising federal prosecutor.

The conditions: mandatory ethics review. Reassignment off the Strand case for the duration of prosecution. Six-month suspension of undercover certification.

She read the finding at her kitchen table — her actual kitchen table, in her actual apartment, which she'd moved back into three days after the cover apartment closed.

She sat with it for a while.

The reassignment she'd expected. The undercover suspension she'd expected. She was still a detective. Still financial crimes. The case that had absorbed two years of her professional life would close without her in the room — Sandoval's office would handle the prosecution, and she would follow it from the outside like everyone else.

She thought about David Park, twenty-eight years old, who had found the discrepancy and trusted someone with it and ended up in the Harrow River.

She thought about the folder that had been open on her desk, three months ago: a photograph of a man coming out of a building on Alcott Street, morning coffee, head turned three-quarters.

She picked up her phone.

"The finding came in," she said when he answered.

## Off the Record

by Ivy Marlowe

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"I know," he said. "Sandoval told me. I'm sorry about the undercover—"

"Don't," she said. "I told you not to apologize for what I chose."

"Right." A pause. "Are you alright?"

She looked at her kitchen. At the notebook on the table. At the city outside her window — the ordinary city, the one that existed on the days when cases were filed and findings were read and things that had happened couldn't be made to unhappen.

"Yes," she said. "I'm alright." She paused. "The Petrova photograph."

A beat. "Yes?"

"Is it still available?"

She heard something in his voice that she didn't try to name because naming it would require acknowledging how much it mattered, and she wasn't quite ready to do that in a kitchen on a Tuesday morning.

"I've been holding it," he said. "I had a feeling."

"Put it aside for me," she said. "I'll come by when this is done."

"The prosecution could take—"

"I know how long prosecutions take," she said. "I'm patient."

She heard him smile. "Yes," he said. "You are."

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## Evidence

Viktor Strand was indicted on forty-three counts nine months later.

Money laundering. Racketeering. Conspiracy. And one count of murder in the first degree for the death of David Park, financial analyst, age twenty-eight, whose case had been open on the books in homicide for three years and was finally, in the sixth month of Nora's forced distance from the investigation, formally closed.

She was in a conference room at Sandoval's office when the indictment was read. Not as a witness — she'd given her testimony two months prior, in a deposition that had lasted four days and covered every angle of the transfer analysis and the methodology of her undercover operation. She was in the conference room because Sandoval had called and said: *you've earned this*.

She sat in the back and listened.

When it was done, she walked out into the street and stood in the afternoon light — the late November kind, sharp and clear — and breathed.

Then she walked to Alcott Street.

The gallery was open. She could see through the window that there was a new show — large canvases, a young painter she didn't know, in colors that had the quality of light in very early morning. The kind of light that meant something was about to begin.

She pushed open the door.

He was in the main room, talking to a couple near the back. He looked up when she came in. The look lasted exactly as long as it needed to.

He excused himself.

He crossed the gallery with the deliberate, unhurried pace she knew — the pace of a man who didn't rush toward things he'd been waiting for, because

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the waiting was part of the cost and the cost was the point.

"Nora Voss," he said.

"Callum Reyes," she said.

"The indictment," he said.

"Forty-three counts," she said. "Including Park."

He nodded. Something moved across his face — the particular expression of a person putting down something heavy they'd been carrying for a long time. Not relief exactly. Something more complicated. The end of a weight that had been so long it had become structural, and now the structure had to figure out what it was without it.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "Or I will be." He held her gaze. "You?"

"The suspension ends in six weeks," she said. "I'm reinstated fully in January." She paused. "I've been drawing up paperwork on a cold case I want to reopen. Financial fraud. Different from Strand — smaller operation, but the pattern is similar. I think there are connections."

"Of course you do," he said.

"There's a desk job opening in organized crime with Sandoval's office," she said. "Civilian consultant. Financial forensics."

He looked at her. "Is that what you want?"

"I don't know yet. I'm looking at it." She paused. "I wanted to tell you."

"Why?"

She looked at him. "Because you're the reason I started following the money instead of just reading the charges," she said. "Because the way you described the provenance work — tracking what actually happened

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versus what the record says happened — changed the way I work." She held his gaze. "You made me a better detective. I thought you should know."

He was quiet for a moment.

"And everything else?" he said. "Beyond the detective part."

She looked at him. The gallery around them, the new paintings in their early-morning light. The Petrova series on the far wall, the fourth photograph — the accumulated layers, everything still present, just become something else.

"I'd like to have dinner," she said.

"As yourself," he said. "Not a cover."

"Entirely as myself," she said. "Which is—" She stopped. "Less managed than you might be expecting."

"I know exactly what you are," he said. "I've been paying attention for nine months."

She smiled. He looked at her smile in the way he'd looked at the paintings, she noticed — like something he'd been waiting to find.

"The Petrova," she said. "I came for it too."

"I know." He moved to the wall beside her and they stood in front of the fourth photograph — the accumulated layers, the history of every version still visible under the last. "It's yours. It's been yours."

She looked at it. The surface that held everything it had been. The long evidence of itself.

"Come to dinner," he said. "And then come see where it would live, and we'll figure out the rest."

She turned and looked at him — really looked, the way she'd learned to look

## Off the Record

by Ivy Marlowe

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at things that cost something. The face she'd studied in a surveillance photograph eight months ago and had spent the intervening time learning to see properly. The man under the file, the person under the subject, the reality under the record.

"Yes," she said. "Alright."

The light in the gallery was the late-afternoon kind — the kind that moved, that shifted, that turned the room gold for twenty minutes and then was gone until tomorrow.

They stood in it for a while before it went.

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## **Epilogue: Case Notes (Redacted)**

*The following is excerpted from the personal record of Detective Nora Voss, Financial Crimes Division, currently seconded to the Office of the United States Attorney, Organized Crime Task Force. The record is maintained independently of case files and has not been submitted to any official archive.*

*The Strand prosecution concluded with convictions on thirty-nine of forty-three counts. Sentencing: life without parole for the Park murder; consecutive terms totaling fifty-two years for the financial crimes counts. Viktor Strand will not be conducting business from any address other than a federal facility.*

*The IA suspension concluded as scheduled. My undercover certification was reinstated in January.*

*I did not take the Sandoval desk position. I remained in financial crimes, where I reopened the cold case I'd identified, which subsequently led to a separate prosecution that closed eight months later. I've been told this is a pattern.*

*The Petrova photograph lives in my apartment, on the wall in the room that faces east. It costs me something every morning when I look at it. This is, I've been told, the point.*

*I've stopped keeping track of what goes in the personal file and what goes in the case file. The categories turned out to be less distinct than advertised.*

*What I know about evidence after eight years: it doesn't always tell you what happened. It tells you what it has to tell you, which is sometimes the same thing and sometimes isn't. The difference matters. It's the work.*

*What I know about other things: the same applies.*

— N.V.

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## Off the Record

by Ivy Marlowe

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**Word count:** ~20,000 words **Heat rating:** Spice Level 4 — tension-forward, intimate scenes present but the story is character and plot driven **Tropes:** Enemies to Lovers, Forbidden Romance, Morally Grey Hero, Undercover Detective, Slow Burn **Resolution:** HEA implied, earned through plot **Author:** Lenora Vale **Themes:** Evidence vs. truth, institutional loyalty vs. personal conscience, the cost of doing the right thing in the wrong way, what patience actually means